DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 411 CS 503 835

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TITLE Political Communication Coursework and the Skills Utilized by Political Professionals.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Milwaukee, WI, April 15-17, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Communication Skills; *Education Work Relationship; Higher Education; *Job Skills; *Politics; *Relevance (Education); Speech Curriculum; *Speech Instruction

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine those communication and general job skills necessary to adequately prepare college graduates for employment in politics. Subjects were 40 political party staff members of the Illinois General Assembly, who completed questionnaires concerning the communication and general skills they used in their jobs. In addition, information was gathered from each Illinois college offering a course in political communication concerning the topics covered in the course and reading materials used. The political professionals indicated that research skills were the most important and frequently used in their jobs; however, an examination of the college political communication course descriptions revealed very little emphasis placed upon research techniques. The professionals attributed more than half of their overall communication knowledge to previous and present job experiences, indicating once again that colleges are not providing sufficient training in this area. The professionals attributed their overall knowledge of organizational skills equally to college and previous and present job experiences. (FL)

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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION COURSEWORK AND THE SKILLS UTILIZED BY POLITICAL PROFESSIONALS

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Speech Association Convention, Milwaukee, Wisc., April, 17, 1982.

CS503435

Educators have recently begun to place more emphasis on the relationship between the curriculum they teach and the needs of students in our society. Many academic disciplines have begun to focus on the needs of individuals not intending on pursuing education as a career (Burhan & Gaske, 1975; Taylor & Buchanan, 1973; McBath, 1976; Power-Ross & McDowell, 1979; Blankenship, 1978; and Gray & Wilson, 1981).

Communication educators have joined this trend toward career education. Blankenship (1978) relates that "communicators are beginning to ask critical questions about alternative career opportunities for graduates, and how to educate students to take advantage of those opportunities."

Accompanying this emphasis on "responsiveness" in speech communication coursework have been many studies attempting to measure the effectivenss of the changes in coursework (Schuelke, 1975; Edgeworth, 1978; Hanna, 1978; Kaplin, 1979; Rudolph, 1979; Marlier & Phillips-Madson, 1979; Tubbs, 1975; and Blankenship & Sweeney,1980). The studies allude to the necessities of meeting the needs of both communication graduates and the organizations which have employment opportunities.

One area of the communication discipline that has extensive employment opportunies is the area of political

communication (Schmidt & Schmidt, 1981). Both the Republican and Democrat National Committees employ extensive national level staffs. In addition, many states operate partisan state-wide headquarters. The Illinois legislature employs political professionals to assist with legislative matters. Candidates at the national, state and even local levels are continually seeking trained campaign personnel.

Despite the employment opportunies that are available within the field of political communication, research that examines the needs of students seeking to be political professionals is limited.

Trent (1979) discusses the need for communication courses for and about women involved in elective politics. While the author lists and describes guidelines for a more effective political communication course, the course seems to be structured for women running for office, rather than for women seeking employment as a paid political staff member.

Schmidt (1980) takes a more general view of political communication coursework by identifying problems which cause lost opportunities to political communication graduates: 1) political communication coursework does a poor job of covering the "nuts and bolts" mechanics necessary to operate effectively; 2) communication graduates often lack the political contacts necessary to obtain professional employment; and 3) professionalism is suspect in the political world

where a person is a Republican or Democrat first and a professional second. Schmidt suggests a revision in course-work, along with an increasing emphasis on internship programs to help solve these problems.

Balch and Davis (1978) surveyed 530 members of the U.S. Congressional Staff Directory. Of the 112 responses received, there was no indication of a relationship between the respondent's major in college and his/her employment within politics. The authors did note, however, that "undergraduate courses which address themselves to the needs of future applied political scientists and technicians are still small in number" (p. 197). For the most part, their research deals with political science skills and coursework in general. However, the authors do recognize the importance of communication abilities to the political professional.

Students of communication also realize the potential of political communication training. A study completed by Gray and Wilson (1981) reports that 24% of the respondents who chose communication as a college major chose political science as a minor. The authors attribute this to the interest of pursuing non-academic careers in government.

The literature indicates that a close examination of communication coursework is needed in order to effectively evaluate employment opportunities for communication graduates. There also appears to be an interest by students to enter a non-teaching career within the field of politics or govern-

ment. Despite the increased interest by communication students in pursuing careers in political communication, there is relatively little data concerning the effectiveness of current coursework in teaching those skills that political professionals should possess if they are to function effectively within the field of politics. In fact, only eight Illinois colleges and universities currently offer a course in the area of political communication. If one of the goals of educators is to prepare graduates to work in non-academic careers, then an investigation of the skills needed by graduates within the field of politics is needed.

The purpose of this study was to determine those communication skills necessary to adequately prepare college graduates for professional employment in politics. In addition, an evaluation of current political communication coursework was completed in order to determine if the skills being presented are those skills needed by graduates to work as political professionals.

Procedures and Instrumentation

The 81st Illinois House of Representatives and Senate majority and minority offices were contacted in order to obtain the names of all political professional staff members in those offices. For the purposes of this study, political professional was operationalized as the Republican and Democrat majority and minority political staff members of the General Assembly. The term refers to non-secretarial

paid positions. The seventy-four individuals holding such positions became the subjects for the study.

In addition, recent catalogues of all Illinois colleges and universities were examined by the researcher. Eight universities were identified as listing a course in political communication. Letters were mailed to those eight universities requesting outlines of the topics covered and lists of all reading materials utilized within the political communication courses. An additional letter was sent to those universities failing to respond to the first request.

A focus group interview was conducted with three staff members of the Illinois General Assembly who had previously been employed as political professionals. The interview served to generate a list of communication and general skills that are utilized by political professionals. The interview also eliminated any problems with the appropriate labeling of those skills.

The information gathered from the focus group interview was transferred into survey format. An administrative assistant to the Illinois House majority leader agreed to aid in the administration of the survey. The assistant received briefing concerning the procedure to be followed. The assistant was then responsible for the administration and retrieval of the surveys.

Results

Political Communication Coursework

Materials were received from three of the eight universities contacted (37.5% response rate). An additional university responded with a letter explaining that while its catalogue listed a political communication course, the department had not offered the course in more than five years. Materials were not available for the class.

The course information was categorized into four areas: research, communication, organization, and theory (Table 1). These categories were chosen in order to provide possible comparisons to the political professional skills analysis, and to identify any commonalities between courses.

One of the universities places very little emphasis upon research and organization. The course objective is listed as: "To develop the student's understanding of the significance of the speechmaking of contemporary American political, social and religious leaders." This course objective lends itself to a great emphasis upon communication skills. Public speaking, credibility, writing, and delivery styles are likely to have a great emphasis within this course. However, students are not likely to obtain much experience in the skills that political professionals considered important. Research techniques, budget design, and report writing do not seem to be topics of discussion in this particular course.

The other two courses appear to have similarities. Both place a relatively large emphasis upon research and communication. The courses both discuss research techniques involved in political campaigns. The courses also seem to place an equal emphasis upon communication skills. The communication areas are very campaign strategy oriented. For example, both courses discuss how to develop a campaign plan, and the use of political advertising within the campaign. Within the organizational area, the courses emphasize campaign design and organizational strategies. It was impossible to determine the extent of other organizational skills.

Both courses also seemed to place a great deal of emphasis upon theory. However, there was not enough information provided to distinguish the extent of the theory application.

Political Professionals Surveys

Forty usable responses were returned from the political professionals (54% completion rate). Frequency data were obtained for each communication and overall skill (Tables 2-4).

Each of the skills seemed to fall into one of three categories: research skills, communication skills, and organizational skills. In order to add clarity to the remainder of the analysis, the researcher recoded the skills into one of the three categories.

The skills data were then cross-tabulated in order to

determine how the skills were obtained. Research, as the most important communication skill, was most often learned in college (71.4%). Organizational skills were primarily obtained from the subject's present job (60.0%)(Table 5).

In reference to the most frequently utilized skills, 60% of the respondents attributed research skills to college training. However, communication skills were considered to be obtained equally from college and previous and/or present job experience (50% each). Organizational skills were attributed 100% of the time to college (Table 6).

The most important general skill identified was research, and 81.3% of the respondents attributed their research knowledge to college training (Table 7). However, only 40% of the respondents who listed communication skills as being most important, received those skills in college. The acquisition of organizational skills was split between college (50%) and previous and/or present job (50%).

Twenty-three (57.5%) of the respondents indicated that they were currently holding their first political position. The 17 respondents (42.5%) holding at least their second political position identified political contacts (33.3%) as the manner in which they obtained their first job in politics. However, internships (27.8%) and previous job contacts (22.2%) were also considered important factors (Table 8).

When the respondents were asked how they obtained their present job, 45% listed internships; while previous job contacts

and political contacts were each listed by 12.5% of the respondents (Table 8).

TABLE 1

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION COURSEWORK

University # 1	University # 2	University # 3
Research Skills	Research Skills	Research Skills
1. General strategies of organizing, designing, and conducting campaigns	1. Computer speeches	1. Historical studies of rhetoric
2. Assessing and evaluating campaigns	2. Doing political research	
Communication Skills	Communication Skills	Communication Skills
1. What circumstances, ways and to what extent do communication and persuasion influence election results	1. Semlak-Williams channel model	1. Study the significance of the speechmaking of contemporary American political, social, and religious leaders
2. Strategies and tactics of persuasion in political campaigns: themes, issues, and mass media	2. Campaign management and credibility	

TABLE 1 (continued)

3. General strategies of organization, designing and conducting campaigns	3. Forces in consciousness-raising	
4. Influencing voters' decisions by non-partisan sources (media)	4. Political spots and debates	
5. Assessing and evaluating campaigns	5. Ethics of communications of political office holders	
	6. The role of media in the political profess and its effects	
Organizational Skills	Organizational Skills	Organizational Skills
1. General strategies of organization, designing, and conducting campaigns	1. Campaign management	1. (None apparent)
Presentation of Theory	Presentation of Theory	Presentation of Theory
1. Major views of political communication	1. Bormann's Dramatistic Theory	1. (None apparent)

TABLE I (continued)

2. Bases of voting choices: how voters make up their minds	2. Cragan-Shields Theory
	3. Social and campaign movements (Bormann, Burke, Bender)
	4. Role of media in political process and its effects
	5. Agenda setting: need and gratifications

TABLE 2

MOST IMPORTANT SKILL RANKINGS

Skill Category	Number of 1st Place Rankings	Number of 2nd Place Rankings	Number of 3rd Place Rankings	Number of 4th Place Rankings	Number of 5th Place Rankings
Release Writing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Scheduling	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Speech Writing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (7.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Newsletter Writing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Letter Writing	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	8 (20.0%)	7 (17.5%)	11 (27.5%)
Graphic Design	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Research Design	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Budget Design	4 (10.0%)	3 (7.5%)	7 (17.5%)	8 (20.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Interviewing	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (5.0%)

TABLE 2 (continued)

Report Writing	5 (12.5%)	16 (40.0%)	11 (27.5%)	4 (10.0%)	1 (2.5%)
AV Usage	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Direct Mail Dev.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Public Speaking	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Mailing List Dev.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Targetting	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Issue Research	21 (52.5%)	10 (25.0%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Presentations	5 (12.5%)	4 (10.0%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (5.0%)	5 (12.5%)
Other	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	6 (15.0%)
Total	40 (100.0%)	40 (100.0%)	40 (100.0%)	38 (95.0%)	38 (95.0%)

Note: Numbers do not total 100% in all instances because of missing values.

TABLE 3

MOST FREQUENT SKILL RANKINGS

Skill Category	Number of 1st Place Rankings	Number of 2nd Place Rankings	Number of 3rd Place Rankings	Number of 4th Place Rankings	Number of 5th Place Rankings
Release Writing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Scheduling	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Speech Writing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)
Newsletter Writing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Letter Writing	2 (5.0%)	3 (7.5%)	11 (27.5%)	4 (10.0%)	13 (32.5%)
Graphic Design	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Research Design	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	3 (7.5%)	6 (15.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Budget Design	2 (5.0%)	6 (15.0%)	4 (10.0%)	8 (20.0%)	2 (5.0%)
Interviewing	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	1 (2.5%)	4 (10.0%)

TABLE 3 (continued)

Report Writing	4 (10.0%)	11 (27.5%)	8 (20.0%)	3 (7.5%)	6 (15.0%)
AV Usage	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Direct Mail Dev.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Public Speaking	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Mailing List Dev.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Targetting	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Issue Research	20 (50.0%)	10 (25.0%)	3 (7.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Presentations	7 (17.5%)	5 (12.5%)	2 (5.0%)	6 (15.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Other	2 (5.0%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)
Total	40 (100.0%)	40 (100.0%)	40 (100.0%)	37 (92.5%)	37 (92.5%)

Note: Numbers do not total 100% in all instances because of missing values.

TABLE 4

OVERALL SKILL RANKINGS

Skill Category	Number of 1st Place Rankings	Number of 2nd Place Rankings	Number of 3rd Place Rankings	Number of 4th Place Rankings	Number of 5th Place Rankings
Organization	6 (15.0%)	7 (17.5%)	4 (10.0%)	7 (17.5%)	6 (15.0%)
Office Mgmt.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Typing	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Oral Comm.	7 (17.5%)	13 (32.5%)	5 (12.5%)	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Research	17 (42.5%)	8 (20.0%)	4 (10.0%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (5.0%)
Bookkeeping	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Telephone Comm.	0 (0.0%)	3 (7.5%)	10 (25.0%)	7 (17.5%)	7 (17.5%)
Group Comm.	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (5.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Interpersonal	3 (7.5%)	5 (12.5%)	7 (17.5%)	5 (12.5%)	8 (20.0%)

TABLE 4 (continued)

Management	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Persuasion	2 (5.0%)	1 (2.5%)	4 (10.0%)	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)
Other	3 (7.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)
Total	40 (100.0%)	39 (97.5%)	39 (97.5%)	39 (95.0%)	38 (95.0%)

Note: Numbers do not total 100% in all instances because of missing values.

TABLE 5

MOST IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION SKILL
BY PLACE LEARNED

MOST IMPORTANT SKILL	PLACE LEARNED		
	College	Previous Job	Present Job
Research	71.4 (15)	14.3 (3)	14.3 (3)
Communication	55.6 (5)	33.3 (3)	11.1 (1)
Organization/ other	20.0 (1)	20.0 (1)	60.0 (3)
Total	60.0 (21)	20.0 (7)	20.0 (7)

TABLE 6

MOST FREQUENT COMMUNICATION SKILL
BY PLACE LEARNED

MOST FREQUENT SKILL	PLACE LEARNED		
	College	Previous Job	Present Job
Research	60.0 (12)	20.0 (4)	20.0 (4)
Communication	50.0 (6)	16.7 (2)	33.3 (4)
Organization	100.0 (3)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
Total	60.0 (21)	17.1 (6)	22.9 (8)

TABLE 7

OVERALL SKILLS BY PLACE LEARNED

OVERALL IMPORTANT SKILLS	PLACE LEARNED		
	College	Previous Job	Present Job
Communication	40.0 (4)	50.0 (5)	10.0 (1)
Organization	50.0 (3)	33.3 (2)	16.7 (1)
Research	81.3 (13)	12.5 (2)	6.3 (1)
Total	62.5 (20)	28.1 (9)	9.4 (3)

TABLE 8

METHOD OF OBTAINING EMPLOYMENT

Method	First Job	Current Job
Previous Job Contact	4 (22.2%)	5 (12.5%)
Internship	5 (27.8%)	18 (45.0%)
Political Contacts	6 (33.3%)	5 (12.5%)
Civil Service	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Employment Agency	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
College Placement	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Family	1 (5.6%)	1 (2.5%)
Other	1 (5.6%)	6 (15.0%)
Combination	1 (5.6%)	4 (10.0%)

Discussion

Tubbs (1975) expresses the need for colleges to prepare students to do more than teach what they have been taught. Two of the political communication courses examined appear to be moving toward preparing students to work outside of education. The courses seem to be offering some application of skills, as well as some theoretical background.

Examiniation of the political communication courses was somewhat limited by the response rate and the constraints of the course outlines. While it was possible to briefly define the categories of skills, further analysis was impossible.

The political professionals surveyed considered research to be the most important and frequently used skill. In order to understand this, one must analyze the duties performed by the subjects. The political professionals surveyed were primarily responsible for the daily activities of the 81st Illinois General Assembly. At times, the staff members work directly with the legislators in the organization, development, and preparation of bills. Research skills are extensively utilized in such positions. Particular emphasis is placed upon issue research by those political professionals doing their job effectively.

The political professionals attributed the acquisition of their research skills primarily to college coursework. However, an examination of the political communication coursework reveals that very little emphasis is placed upon research

techniques. Therefore, it seems that graduates are receiving their research training in collegiate courses independent of political communication coursework. The political professionals surveyed were of diverse educational backgrounds. However, 22 of the subjects attended one of the eight Illinois schools offering political communication coursework. Of the 22 respondents who attended the universities, 11 were political science majors. There was one journalism major and no communication majors (Appendix A).

While is seems reasonable that subjects might receive research training outside communication departments, it is distressing that even more closely related communication skills, such as interviewing, presentation organization, and letter writing are not being solely learned in college. Typically, these skills are considered to fit into the curricula of at least one department. For example, interviewing has been listed as an entire semester course at Illinois State University for quite some time.

Subjects in this study attributed more than half (60%) of their overall communication knowledge to previous and present job experience. In addition, the respondents attributed their overall organizational skills equally to college and their previous and present job knowledge (50% each). It appears that several phenomena could be occurring. Communication departments might be failing to reach students intending to pursue careers in politics or those departments are failing to provide sufficient training for those students they do reach.

Gray and Wilson (1981) found that many departments outside of communication require or strongly suggest to their students a minor in communication. In fact, 46% of the universities surveyed report that business-related departments encourage a minor in communication. However, very few (4%) encourage political science majors to obtain a communication minor. If this is the case in Illinois,then communication educators should encourage other department (most specifically political science) to advise students to minor in communication.

Schmidt (1980) indicates that the instructors are rarely veterans of the political world. This hampers the instructors' first-hand knowledge of the political arena. If educators are concerned with preparing graduates to work within politics, then steps should be taken to ensure optimum instruction. One way for this to occur is through the political involvement of the political communication course instructors.

Such a recommendation can benefit in several ways. First, the instructors will have a better knowledge of the political arena. Thus, the instructor will be equipped to identify the skills and strategies utilized within politics. Secondly, the instructors' participation can provide possible internship and employment contacts for the department and students. In addition, if a communication instructor is working within politics, a degree in communication is likely to become more rapidly understood and appreciated.

The Illinois General Assembly does have a very active internship program. However, no communication majors were

among those respondents who had received positions as a result of the program. This author cites several explanations for this. First, communication students might have applied for internships but were turned down because of a perceived or real lack of training and experience. Of course, the mere possession of an internship does not guarantee employment. However, significant numbers of political professionals in this study did attribute their current positions to internships. Secondly, the initial internship contacts might not have been made by the departments of communication. At the time of data collection no communication interns were working with the Illinois General Assembly. This is an unfortunate situation because from this author's first-hand experience, communication students could be utilized very effectively within the internship program of the Illinois General Assembly.

Much needs to be done in order to prepare communication students to work as political professionals. The research suggests that the students have the interest to pursue that career objective. Through a reassessment of political communication coursework, involvement in politics by the instructors of the courses, an increased awareness of what a communication graduates can offer, more interdepartmental communication concerning the benefits of a communication minor, and the development of political contacts through internships--the work can begin.

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APPENDIX A

College Majors of Subjects

Undergraduate

13 Political Science
6 Economics and Finance
5 Psychology
3 History
2 Social Science
1 Agricultural Economics
1 Business
1 Philosophy
1 International Studies
1 Journalism
1 English
1 Math
1 Russian
1 Elementary Education
1 Speech and Hearing Sciences

39 (1 survey was incomplete)

Graduate (master's)

5 Political Science
2 Economics and Finance
2 Business
1 Regional Planning
1 Public Administration
1 Psychology

12

Graduate (doctorate)

1 Finance

Post-graduate

5 Law